

SCHOOL AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP SERIES



# Grades 6, 7 & 8 **7 Themes:**

**Parent, Family and Community  
Involvement  
In the Middle Grades**

**In an era of  
educational reform,  
what promising  
strategies have been  
developed to strengthen  
parent, family, and  
community involvement  
in grades 6-8?**

**I**n 1991, RMC Research was awarded a federal contract to begin to answer this question. As one of 12 studies on educational reform funded by the United States Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the project examined three contexts for family and community involvement in the middle grades.

- Comprehensive district-wide efforts to involve parents, families, and community members in the education of students.
- Parent and community involvement in the restructuring of education in the middle grades.
- Involvement of parents and families through interactive activities at home that support learning in school.

The charge of the study was to analyze and document promising, successful models and practices so that educators could learn from and emulate them in other reform efforts in the middle grades.

Building from the findings of the study, this booklet suggests seven key themes of parent/family and community involvement in the middle grades. The description of each theme includes actions that schools, communities, and families might take to promote effective partnerships. Real, specific action examples from the participating programs follow. The booklet also contains brief descriptions of the nine programs studied.

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**Seven themes**

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**Program descriptions**

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**References**

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list of themes**

## **MORE ABOUT THE STUDY AND THE SCHOOLS**

During the spring and summer of 1994, RMC researchers visited nine schools that had created new strategies related to parent, family, and community involvement practices in the middle grades. Three sites were chosen for each of the three research contexts.

### **COMPREHENSIVE DISTRICT-WIDE PROGRAM SITES**

Fort Worth, Texas  
Louisville, Kentucky  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

### **SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING SITES**

Beck Middle School, Georgetown, South Carolina  
Lamoni Middle School, Lamoni, Iowa  
Shelburne Middle School, Shelburne, Vermont

### **ADULT-CHILD LEARNING SITES**

Community School District Number 3, New York City  
Natchez-Adams Parent Center, Natchez, Mississippi  
Rochester Public Schools, Rochester, New York

After the site visits, RMC developed case studies describing the context for the reform initiatives; how programs were planned, designed, and carried out; the challenges faced by each site; and the support they needed to embark on reform.

A cross-analysis of the case studies suggested seven themes on school/family and community partnership in the middle grades, themes featured in this booklet.

Each site featured in the study offered valuable lessons on parent, family, and community involvement in the middle grades, but all agreed that the job of reform has just begun. Time and again we heard that there is more to learn, and that they need more time to accomplish their goals.

These seven themes are a beginning, the fruits of the experiences of forward-thinking, ambitious, and successful educators in grades 6-8. We invite other educators to make use of the lessons learned by their pioneering colleagues, and turn those lessons into progressive, effective programs in their schools.

# The stakes are high and immediate for everyone.

The middle grades mean more than transition between elementary school and high school. During the middle grades, students begin to wrestle with autonomy, independence, and responsibility. Many of their relationships change, with parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and others in the community. Their actions have immediate, significant, and long term consequences. As they become active in the community, they need to know more about how to interact with other people and apply what they are learning. These years call for new independence for students; however, that doesn't mean less family and community involvement. It means thinking about new, substantial, and appropriate ways for supporting students' learning and growing.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Create family and community involvement programs that satisfy the needs of middle grade students and their families.
- Link middle grade students' learning to real world experiences.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Explore different ways of relating to students in the middle grades.
- Engage middle grade students in active decision making.

### COMMUNITIES

- Publicize the success of middle grade schools and students to emphasize their economic, social, and political viability and impact in the community.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### In Fort worth, TX and Louisville, KY. . .

Middle grade students experience the world of work "first hand." Both districts offer programs that allow students to serve in mini-internships in varied businesses throughout their cities. Vital Link (Fort Worth) and Job Shadowing (Louisville) give students a preview of the skills and responsibilities required in the businesses and professions where they intern. In both districts, students and employers report that students gain a greater appreciation for what it takes to do a job and the education required. Businesses say that working with middle grade students helps the businesses clarify their own experiences, and improves their relationships and attitudes about students and schools.

### In Several Sites . . .

Parents reported that they and students wanted new kinds of involvement in the middle grades. They wanted less in the way of day-to-day contact (as they do in elementary school). Other parents defined these new roles by becoming advocates or decision makers for the benefit of all students in a grade level, or all students in the school.

# Challenges can become opportunities for family involvement.

Middle grade students face a lot of changes at school: harder subjects, more teachers, and more after-school choices; more freedom and responsibility in how they manage their day; more demanding academics; new ways of interacting with teachers. On the surface, these might look like barriers, making it harder for families to connect with what's going on at school. But with a positive perspective and new insights, parents and teachers can turn these challenges into opportunities, and find new ways to interact with each other and with students.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Use parents as resources in the middle grades
- Create structures that offset any sense of fragmentation caused by the organizational arrangement of the school, fragmentation that might distance or confuse parents.
- Provide specific examples of strategies parents can use to support middle grade student academic success.
- Provide educational opportunities for middle grade parents and families.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Learn about what it means to be an advocate and resource for middle grade students; ask teachers for specific ideas on how to help students academically in the middle grades.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### In Most Sites . . .

Middle grade schools implement middle grade philosophy and concepts, including restructuring the organization of the school for compatibility with student and parent needs and interests. One example: small student multi-age groups, usually called "families," offer the student opportunities to interact with a professional or paraprofessional staff member about personal and academic issues.

### In Shelburne, VT. . .

School restructuring included parents, families, and the community in decisions about the organizational change. With the construction of a new middle school came the creation of a nine year system divided into three-year communities. Personalized education plans will be used to ensure that middle grade students learn necessary skills and concepts.

### In Minneapolis, MN. . .

A Parent Institute trains parents to be advocates for students in their schools. In seminars they learn advocacy, team building, and group processes, and later become trainers themselves.

# Strong relationships provide the core of family and community involvement.

Students in the middle grades want to learn how to build relationships. Supportive and productive relationships are just as important for families, educators, and the community to strengthen middle grade involvement. Schools can be places where relationships form and grow, with long term benefits in understanding one another and building on individual strengths, experiences, and points of view.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Assess the needs of parents and the community as a prelude to forging new relationships; see the school's role as a catalyst for relationship building among school, home, community.
- Create staffing patterns that support relationships.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Make efforts to build ongoing relationships with teachers and school administrators; express views on where involvement opportunities exist.

### COMMUNITIES

- Take advantage of middle school students' relationship with local businesses (as workers and consumers) to make community connections and build support.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### **In Community School District 3, New York City...**

A family involvement program builds on the relationship between individual parents and the schools. The program's staff creates an atmosphere where parents feel comfortable, satisfied, valued, and effective. School neighborhood workers keep track of parents' interests, and information and activities are designed specifically toward these interests. Parents said they feel that school staff know who they are and care about their participation and about them as individuals.

### **In Lamoni Middle School, IA...**

Students participate in LMS, Inc., a student operated business. In addition to the hands-on and project based learning afforded by the activity, LMS, Inc. is a way for students to ground themselves in the real world of their community. Students conduct market research to determine product lines, negotiate financing with the local bank and business supporters, seek technical assistance from community members, and sell their products in local outlets and through direct, house-to-house marketing. Local businesses and community group representatives take part, and parent support is high.

# More people share the responsibility for making decisions, including the student.

The circle of decision makers in a student's life broadens in the middle grades. Parents, counselors, support agency personnel, community and business people, five or six teachers, and students themselves all have a say in the student's future. Everyone needs to communicate and coordinate information and ideas so that valid decisions can be made. The student's role becomes more intense and critical, and must be acknowledged.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Actively engage middle grade parents, families, teachers, community leaders, and students in decisions about curriculum and instruction.
- Involve middle grade parents, families, and students in conferences about course work and progress.
- Streamline, coordinate, and focus information from the school to ensure smooth communication with middle grade parents and families.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Identify school policies and expectations to prepare for the role of advocate and supporter in the middle grades; express points of view in both formal and informal ways.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### In Shelburne, VT...

As part of their school reform efforts, the school implemented a comprehensive series of informational and opinion-gathering activities with parents and community members

### In Lamoni Middle School, IA...

Parents raised concerns about middle grade

students and older high school students sharing one building and an organizational structure typical of a high school. A task force consisting of community members and school district staff examined alternatives to the organizational structure, resulting in a recommendation to restructure into a middle school.

Middle school staff had the authority to determine and conduct the operations of the school. With ideas from parents, family members, and the community, the staff created the conditions they believed were necessary for successful middle school implementation, including curriculum and instruction.



# Sustained family and community involvement depends on active advocacy by leaders.

**F**or family and community involvement to work, school leaders need to recognize their potential as catalysts for stimulating the interest and contributions of many players. Because the middle school "community" often reaches wide geographically, school leaders have a unique position to build from the richness and diversity of the many communities and families served by the school. This involves investing all of the players -- school personnel, community and business members, families -- with both responsibility and power.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Facilitate, or "orchestrate," connections in the school/home/community environment.
- Use creative approaches for defining leadership, program design, and problem solving.
- Model and promote a climate of success, including fiscal and human resources.

### COMMUNITIES

- Be proactive about contacting schools and parents; take advantage of existing relationships with clients, customers, and colleagues to make the connection to school.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Represent the interests of students and schools.
- Use community connections to advocate for the school.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### Louisville, KY. . .

One principal describes his role this way: "I have the big picture of what's going on in the school. But, I don't feel like I have to be the leader of every activity. I have good people to work with, and they are capable of leadership, too." In addition to being actively involved in school activities, the principal uses his connections to the community to provide additional funds and human resources for programs at the school.

### In Fort Worth, TX

The community was primarily responsible for

helping the school district define the core skills and competencies needed by students in the middle grades. The community viewed their work with the school district as critical to providing a skilled work force for the future. Community leaders pursued less traditional roles, leading change efforts in curriculum and instruction.

### In Beck Middle School, Georgetown, SC...

The Rural Education Alliance for Collaborative Humanities (Project REACH) aims to improve student learning by making students experts about their own families and communities. A key element of REACH's success is the combination of community and instruction, taking the family and community as subjects of respect and interest.

# Front-line workers need support systems to sustain and promote family involvement.

Teachers and school personnel in the middle grades -- the front-line workers connecting with students and families every day -- need strong support to keep their energy high, deal with common problems, and remain effective. Schools can help by supplying professional development, giving them some authority to make decisions with parents about services that address parent and family needs, and building social and emotional support structures.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Provide professional development for school personnel on promising practices and programs for parent and family involvement.
- Empower front-line workers to make key decisions that connect parents and families with needed services.
- Design support systems that give front-line workers more time for parent and family involvement.

- Create structures that provide social and emotional support for front-line workers.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### Louisville, KY. . .

The PTA serves as a strong provider of information about the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA). The Gheens Professional Development Academy schedules courses throughout the year for teachers on parent and family involvement.

Youth Services Centers, mandated through KERA, serve families and students in the middle grades in high poverty areas of the city. The Youth Services Centers are located in middle grade schools and serve all of the school population.

Teachers in these schools report that they have an advantage over other schools. Services for the entire family take place in the building: for example, health and social services, employment counseling and placement, and voter registration. "With everything right here in the school, it's a lot easier to connect families with the services they need. There's no 'red tape' or bureaucracy to deal with. I simply have the power to refer students and families that need the help," explained one teacher.

### In Several Sites...

Teachers share common planning time to deal with student and family issues, or have released time to work with parents. These structures allow stronger partnerships between teachers and the families of students with whom they work.

# Families need to know what students are learning.

It's easier for parents to keep in touch with the curriculum in the elementary grades. When it comes to middle grades, the content gets harder and the number of teachers increases. Parents sometimes lose track of what their students are learning, and why. But if parents are going to continue encouraging their students and linking them to the help they need to succeed academically, they need ongoing, appropriate connections to the subject matter. They also need support to understand how their roles in helping students learn changes in the middle grades.

## ACTIONS FOR . . .

### SCHOOLS

- Learn about and respect parents' preferences for the type and extent of curriculum information they need to be effective in their interactions with their students.
- Design and assign meaningful, interactive homework assignments; brief parents on interactive activities that are appropriate for students and subject matter in middle grades.

### PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Create an environment that values and promotes achievement.
- Talk with the school and teachers about what is being taught, and meaningful ways to help your students meet academic goals.

## FOR EXAMPLE . . .

### In Rochester, NY...

The district's Parent/Child Basic Learning Program includes Family Math (a program that links students and family members in joint learning activities), Family Reading, and Family Science. Family members participate with the student in fun activities that promote learning difficult concepts.

### In Several Sites...

Parents said they want curriculum connections that: give an overview of the course and its goals (perhaps even a course outline); explain what students will learn in a general sense; explain the approaches the teacher will be using; and provide occasional direct connections to a homework assignment.

### In Natchez, MS...

When Chapter 1 students struggle with skill mastery, teachers refer the student and parent to the Natchez Adams Parent Center. In a conference the teacher completes a parent assistance form describing the skill the teacher would like the student to practice. The parent takes the form to the Parent Center where the Center's staff demonstrates and checks out materials to the families that promote skills in the needed areas. Materials focus on activity-based learning such as games, manipulatives and puzzles.

## THE PROGRAMS

### Jefferson County Public School, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) supports parent/family and community involvement initiatives through district-level policies. Program design for parent/family/community involvement occurs at both the district level and at individual school sites.

Initiatives include Participatory Management Teams, a Middle Grades Assessment Program, district-mandated school/family conferences, and participation in major national middle school reform efforts sponsored by granting agencies. The 15th District Parent-Teacher Association, with 77,000 members and 140 chapters, supports parent/family involvement efforts and provides reform-related training for family members and district staff. A second group of initiatives represents partnerships created between JCPS and local business that benefit either all schools in the district, or business/school partnerships with middle schools.

Schools actively involve parents/families and community members in the design and implementation of programs. Youth Services Centers, funded through grants provided by the state legislature, serve students in the middle grades and their families. The Centers link local service providers. In one school, the Neighborhood Place, a regional service center, provides the services of 19 agencies in a "one stop shopping" atmosphere to neighborhood parents/families. Other strategies include Parent Centers, creating a welcoming environment, voice mail systems, homework hotlines, newsletters, parenting workshops, and summer programs.

### Minneapolis Public Schools, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

The Volunteer Services/Family Partnerships (VS/FP) program in Minneapolis Public Schools falls under the umbrella of curriculum and instruction. The VS/PS supports student achievement by providing human resources and materials to enhance the advocacy skills of parents/families and the community. Exploring unique administrative and organizational structure options, the Minneapolis school board recently contracted with a local for-profit consulting firm to oversee the 44,000-student district. The contract holds the superintendent (the consulting firm's CEO) and other school officials financially accountable for a set of objectives. This performance-based contract required the creation of strategies to increase family involvement in schools.

Minneapolis Public Schools, along with 11 other service agencies, participate in the School-Human Services Redesign Initiative (SHSRI). The SHSRI links families with social, health and educational services. In addition to the SHSRI, community and business members participate in individual school/business partnerships.

The Parent Institute provides a 28-hour series of workshops to train parents/ family members to assume leadership and advocacy roles in schools. The Institute began with a small number of parents, but was designed as a trainer-of-trainers model. The Partnership for School Success, a federally funded dropout prevention program, operates in three middle schools. A full-time resource teacher coordinates program activities that include sensitivity training for teachers, home visits, and school-based parent involvement programs.



# Fort Worth Independent District, F T . W O R T H , T E X A S

Project C3 (Communities, Corporations, and Classroom) partners the Fort Worth Independent School District, the Chamber of Commerce and other business leaders who provide the organizational framework for restructuring efforts. Project C3 originated from community concern over the adequacy of student preparation for the workplace. The Project tries to operationally define success in the workplace and change the delivery of classroom instruction to link student learning with real world experiences. As a result district performance-based assessments and projects have been developed; the entire community becomes a "laboratory for learning."

This initiative produced major programs that affect students in the middle grades and their parents. Vital Link provides middle school internships in local businesses; Applied Learning, a curriculum-based effort, focuses on authentic learning, group, and project work; Equity 2000, a national effort to increase the number of economically disadvantaged and minority students who attend and succeed in college; School Based Decision Making (SBDM) includes teachers, parents, and community members in everyday decision making at the school level; and parent volunteer coordinators, a training and resource program involves parent/families directly in their students' learning or in school based activities.

Individual middle school parent/family involvement initiatives include: Parent University (at two alternative middle schools), a parent work contract, and Parents United with Teachers, a pilot program in one school, involves cooperative decision making, critical thinking, and problem solving between teachers and parents/family members.

# Lamoni Middle School, L A M O N I , I O W A

The two counties from which Lamoni draws students are the poorest in the state. The middle school, which serves grades 6-8, was established because parents were concerned about the social interactions between seventh and eighth grade students and older students who were all a part of the high school. A citizen's task force was formed to examine the alternatives. This group incorporated community members and school district staff members who investigated the alternatives. Researchers investigated the alternatives being considered through conferences, meetings, and reports from other schools that had restructured.

Faculty members have since implemented their understanding of the principles supporting progressive middle schools, including community involvement and working along side families. The small size of the community and schools, school staff and community members believe, guides the development of involvement strategies. Parents and community members consistently maintain relationships and communication channels with school staff outside of the school campus: at the stores, churches, family gatherings, and frequently by calling a teacher to talk about students' progress. Likewise, teachers at the middle school call parents and community members about their students, about their perspective on the middle school program, and to request participation in school organized activities.

## Beck Middle School, G E O R G E T O W N , S O U T H C A R O L I N A

Beck Middle School serves grades 6-8 and draws students from logging, agricultural, and coastal communities in surrounding rural areas. At the same time, industrial workers from Georgetown send their students to Beck, as do managers and other professionals.

Beck is one of the state's exemplary sites for Project REACH (Rural Education Alliance for Collaborative Humanities). REACH aims to improve student learning by making students experts about their own families and communities. Although REACH is a humanities program, the staff emphasizes that REACH is a design for a process. It allows the creation of activities that promote self-reflection, a sense of community, and the development of skills and thoughtfulness.

Project REACH at Beck has focused on pocket communities in the area, the "little communities within communities," through research on each culture represented there. Activities have included students interviewing, researching, and writing about family and community; bringing family and distinctive community members into the classroom; involving all staff in writing a REACH publication; and the production of a student performance on Georgetown history.

## Shelburne Middle School, S H E L B U R N E , V E R M O N T

Shelburne Middle School serves grades 4-8 as part of Shelburne School District, which is part of Chittenden South Supervisory District. Chittenden South Supervisory District has been at the forefront of a number of school restructuring efforts. Shelburne has been consistently noted as an exemplary middle school in the state and region because of its academic achievement levels and innovative local programs. Shelburne participated in part of the restructuring initiated by the district, particularly elements of the district's promotion of interdisciplinary learning.

Based on some difficulties perceived with the limited enactment of school reform, Chittenden South Supervisory District initiated a new effort to clarify restructuring goals and plans to the community. Parent focus groups confirmed this need. The middle school solicited parent involvement and general community concerns: a series of meetings, forums, coffee with the principal, and other communication activities. A parent advisory group is in operation.

Planning has guided the changeover to a nine-year educational system divided into three year communities which guarantee that all students will learn what they need to learn; personalized education plans are part of the process. The school board established a "families as partners" policy as one implementation feature.

## Community School District No. 3, N E W Y O R K C I T Y , N E W Y O R K

In 1988, New York City School District 3 reinvented education for students in the middle grades, offering a menu of approaches: schools-within-schools, magnet schools, and other choices. Parent/family involvement initiatives also began in 1988, including the establishment of a Parent Involvement Program (PIP) office. This group contacted each school and organized group within the school to shape optimal approaches to parent involvement. A guiding principle for all programs: be directly responsive to parents' expressed interests. Program activities address parent/child learning activities, parent education and training, parents as decision makers, and parents as advocates.

PIP staff members serve as neighborhood liaisons for schools and two people in each school, usually staff members, work on parent involvement. Staff members strive to create a family atmosphere and make parents feel welcome. All school personnel, including secretaries and security guards, are trained on parent involvement goals.

## Rochester City School District, R O C H E S T E R , N E W Y O R K

The poverty rate in the City of Rochester is higher than it has been in 30 years. Manufacturing, the traditional economic base, has declined; state government services, service industries, transportation and utilities have grown. Many of the newly created jobs pay a minimum wage.

Three-fourths of the students in the district are people of color; most of the students in the district are considered economically disadvantaged. Sixty-eight percent of them qualify for a free or reduced price lunch. Student enrollment continues to grow (up 9 percent in four years).

The district's Parent/Child Basic Learning Program responds to parent interest in supporting their students in school. The program began with the adoption of Family Math, a nationally recognized program that links students and parents/family members in joint learning activities. Based on the success of Family Math, Family Reading and Family Science components were added to the program. Megaskills and a Parent Academy were added to provide parent/family training and support. Teachers and paraprofessionals work as a team in each school that participates in the program. Paraprofessionals are responsible for recruiting families. Teachers develop learning activities described as "fun, engaging . . . [they] offer students an opportunity to learn important concepts they may not grasp in their regular classroom."

In a district faced with severe budget cuts, the Parent/Child Basic Learning Program has grown through funding from state adult education monies. The district is reimbursed, based on adult attendance, for providing adult learning situations.

## Natchez-Adams School District, N A T C H E Z , M I S S I S S I P P I

The Natchez-Adams Parent Center serves Chapter 1 students and their families. The Parent Center focuses parent/family involvement on students' academic progress. The staff created specific response procedures for when a student has difficulty mastering skills.

During a school/family conference the teacher discusses a student's areas of difficulty and completes a parent assistance form (known in the district as a "green sheet"). The form indicates the skill (such as long division) that the student needs to work on over the next six weeks. The parent takes the green sheet to the Parent Center, where they get materials to help them promote the skill. The Center helps them learn how to use the materials with their student. Materials, which are for home use, typically include games, manipulatives and puzzles, and focus on activity-based learning. A follow-up form goes to the referring teacher informing her/him of the parent's visit.

Teachers can also ask for a home visit from the Parent Center when parents are hard to contact. The teacher completes a "yellow form" and Center staff visit the family to encourage parents to meet with the teacher and use the resources in the Parent Center. In addition, families can check out computers and software selected for the specific needs of the student.



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# Related publications

This booklet is one of three publications on family/community involvement in the middle grades written for school practitioners, parents, and families. The others are:

- School and Family Conferences in the Middle Grades, a practical guide to helping teachers and school leaders in the middle grades explore conferences as a communication strategy for school/family partnerships.
- Connecting School Family Community Resources, an exploration of the ways that middle grade schools approach comprehensive service delivery to families.



# 7 Themes:

## **Parent, Family and Community Involvement In the Middle Grades**

The stakes are high and immediate for everyone.

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Challenges can become opportunities for family involvement.

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Strong relationships provide  
the core of family and community involvement.

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More people share the responsibility for making decisions,  
including the student.

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Sustained family and community involvement  
depends on active advocacy by leaders.

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Front-line workers need support systems  
to support and promote family involvement.

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Families need to know what students are learning.

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